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# MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF NON-PROFIT COMMUNITY SPORT FACILITIES IN AN ERA OF AUSTERITY

## Abstract

**Research Question:** This qualitative research explores the impact of austerity on community sport facilities across England (United Kingdom), drawing upon resource dependence theory (RDT) embedded within network theory.

**Research Methods:** In-depth semi-structured interview data were collected from 24 stakeholders related to community sport facilities (n=12 facility managers, n=6 regional grant managers, n=6 national funders both third sector and corporate). The qualitative data were thematically analysed to understand the impact of austerity on how community sport facilities managed their organisations and operations.

**Results and Findings:** The findings from this research offer insight into the challenges that community sport facilities are encountering which have resulted from austerity, and a shrinking of the funding from central Government to local public services. Furthermore, different community sport facilities have navigated these challenges to maintain sustainability, essentially through adapting network structure and through income dynamism. In addition, using a network theory approach alongside RDT within a sporting context, has allowed us to address issues on how network flow and structure impact sustainability and operations within and between organisations.

**Implications:** The article offers managerial recommendations for community sport facility managers, practitioners and policy makers who operate in times of fiscal constraint. It recommends that future sport research utilises and applies both RDT and network theory to examine these changes and the subsequent management strategies adopted to overcome the associated challenges of fiscal constraint.

**KEYWORDS:** Austerity, community, sport, resource dependence theory, management

## **Introduction**

It is difficult to pinpoint a particular moment in time when austerity was chosen as the strategy to protect the economy, but September 2007 and the commencement of the financial crash, was perhaps the catalyst. Since then, governments worldwide (although predominantly those in the west and most pursued most extensively, in the United States of America, the Eurozone and the United Kingdom (UK)) have vigorously-pursued austerity driven policy measures, creating a vacuum for rising inequality (Oxfam, 2013; The International Monetary Fund, 2016). This austerity policy approach has grown and continues to be pursued, even though, as Krugman (2015) aptly notes, that all of the economic research that allegedly supported the austerity push has been discredited,. Research on the impact of austerity has shown that it has had major implications for society on areas including health (Cooper & Whyte, 2017), inequality (Atkinson et al, 2015), homelessness (Loopstra et al 2014) and education (Dorling, 2016). Whilst there has been much research on austerity and the community (see O'Hara, 2014), there has been very limited research on community sport in this austerity period (Parnell, Millward, & Spracklen, 2017), which is ironic, given sport's role in education, health and community cohesion (Coalter et al., 2007; Collins and Kay, 2014; Hunt et al., 2014; Kelly, 2011).

Austerity involves the reduction of public spending, which often results in an increased reliance on the private sector. This article discusses the impact of austerity policies on the management strategies of the non-profit community sport sector in England, given that the sector is often overlooked. In the UK, austerity policies have been a key element of Government policy since the Conservative Party-led (with the Liberal Democrats) coalition government took control in May 2010. The government implemented a range of public

spending cuts as part of its 'Comprehensive Spending Review' (HM Treasury 2010; 2015). This represented a significant fiscal consolidation amounting to a £81 billion reduction in public spending across multiple government departments, delivered on a national and regional scale at a council level in the subsequent years. As a result, public services were stopped, reduced or reorganised, creating challenges for access to, in particular, libraries, clubs for disabled children and leisure centres (Blyth, 2013; Parnell et al., 2015). Following this period, further reduction in expenditure between 2014-2018 were planned (Croucher, 2013). Lowndes and Gardner (2016) have argued that this initial period of austerity has concluded. Coinciding with the election of a majority Conservative government in 2015, England entered a new policy context of new funding cuts, upon departments and services that have already received cuts to their budgets (termed 'super-austerity'), estimated at £18bn of 'consolidation' measures through the 'new fiscal charter' delivered by 2019/2020, adding further threats to public services (HM Treasury, 2015),

In this article, we follow Blyth's (2013, p. 2) description of austerity as 'a form of voluntary deflation in which the economy adjusts through the reduction of wages, prices, and public spending to restore competitiveness which is [supposedly] best achieved by cutting the state's budget, debts, and deficits'. Anstead (2017) discusses that austerity itself is an idea that divides economic and political opinion. It is extremely difficult to argue that a finely nuanced concept such as austerity is definitively "bad", bearing in mind that it has temporal dimensions and may have different effects in different national contexts. However, Marmot and Bell (2009) argue that when pursued by national governments, austerity policies can result in a loss of prosperity and lead a substantial segment of the population into poverty. Findings echoed by Ostry, Loungani, and Furceri (2016) and The International Monetary Fund (World Economic Outlook Report, 2016). Sport is not immune to such policy implications; indeed sport organisations and opportunities could be impacted directly and indirectly by public policy

changes. Given sports role in the policy directions of health, education and community cohesion, sport is a significant contributor to policy targets, changes in sport could also contribute to increased inequality (i.e., sport participation, Widdop et al., 2018).

It is clear, and supported by evidence, that the austerity agenda has increased pressure on local government – the most significant area of public spending – to move towards privatisation (Jones & Stewart, 2012; Levitas, 2012; Parnell, Millward, & Spracklen, 2015) or the asset transfer of public services to third sector / non-profit groups (Nichols et al., 2015). Sport outsourcing has also been found in education contexts (Cope et al., 2015; Parnell et al., 2015; Parnell et al., 2016). Austerity measures in sport are typically associated with budgetary reductions in services, staffing, and most significantly, sports development and community recreation (APSE, 2012; King, 2013a; 2013b). A key element of sport in local government is access to sporting (or playing) opportunities (King, 2013a). This provision includes a broad infrastructure of leisure, recreation and community sport facilities, open spaces in which to participate, and community-based interventions managed by local authority staff or indirectly via third sector organisations or other partner organisations. Partnership network development within a disability third sector sport organisation was found to be beneficial in navigating austerity (Walker & Hayton, 2017), yet some facilities have been unable to limit the risk of funding reductions (Parnell, Millward, & Spracklen, 2014).

A study of the impact of austerity measures on sport participation, between 2008 and 2014 using the Active People Survey (Sport England's flagship survey), suggests that policy goals of widening participation have not been met and that funding cuts may have contributed to this (Widdop et al., 2018). It is reasonable to suggest a reduction in sport provision by local government affects the work of stakeholder organisations and most certainly limit funding, operations and practice (Walker & Hayton, 2018), and has implications for sports participation opportunities. Rostron and Manoli (2018) evidence the challenges financial constraints may

have on national governing bodies of sport, especially those in receipt of government support. Further research, has shown that during a time of austerity policies some sport facilities have found building collaborations difficult (Iversen, 2018) and others have tended to outsource management and increase activity charges (Ramchandani, Shibli, & Kung, 2018). Interestingly, whilst customer satisfaction has risen, there has been a diminished focus on social inclusion objectives, which may result in reduced sport participation opportunities (Ramchandani, Shibli, & Kung, 2018; Widdop et al., 2018). Overall, the economic and political climate suggests declining funding for local government sport services until at least 2020 (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015; LGA, 2013). It is therefore, pertinent and timely that researchers conduct empirical research to understand the impact of austerity on sport management to inform policy makers, future research and the industry.

To address this shortfall in research examining the impact of austerity on sport management and public provision of sport, this paper offers an empirical analysis of implications of austerity driven policy measures on the management strategies and operations of non-profit community sport facilities in England. Recreational sport funding and policy in the UK is administered at the level of the home countries (i.e., England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland), hence reference to 'England' in this paper. There has been limited empirical research on the impact of the economic downturn and the associated era of austerity on non-profit community sport facilities, including the issues, challenges and barriers that they have faced. This research addresses this knowledge gap by analysing how community sport facilities (often managed by third sector organisations) have experienced, managed and overcome austerity-imposed challenges. In doing so, we utilise a resource dependency theory (RDT) lens (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Walker & Hayton, 2017), embedded within network theory (Borgetti and Foster, 2003). Extending the current work using RDT to understand the impact of austerity in sport (Giannoulakis et al., 2017; Walker & Hayton, 2017; 2018), this research

offers new theoretical considerations for those applying RDT to understand impact of austerity, namely as a surface concept within deeper level network theory (see Borgetti & Foster, 2003). This research provides an original insight that is able to inform policy makers on the management strategies adopted by community sports facilities, whilst navigating enforced political economic change, with findings offering learning for managers and policy makers within economies facing fiscal constraint.

### **Theoretical framework**

Resource Dependency Theory (RDT) is based upon ideas developed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), who have explored the most effective strategies for funding methods for any organisation. Wicker and Breuer (2011) and Yeager, Zhang and Diana (2015) suggest it is broadly the idea that the structure and behaviour of an organisation can be explained by its resources. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) suggest that dependence on external resources can reduce the autonomy with which organisations can operate. It also has an impact on power relations between organisations who provide services and those who provide funding.

Yeager, Zhang and Diana (2015) identify three particularly significant factors in the environment that any organisation operates in: *munificence*, *dynamism*, and *competition*. The first of these, *munificence*, refers to the availability and accessibility of resources, and as Yeager, Zhang and Diana (2015, p. 691) suggest, ‘organizations that operate in less munificent environments have to reduce their dependence on certain resources and find alternative resource supplies’ Economic austerity practiced by the UK government since 2010 has certainly resulted in a less munificent environment within which organisations are obliged to find alternative, non-state funding, including within sport contexts (Widdop et al., 2018). *Dynamism* can be described as related to environmental change or innovation (Dess & Beard, 1984). A stable level of change is sustainable for organisations, while a rapid level

creates uncertainty and can destabilise them. Finally, *competition* is reflected in the number of stakeholders that an organisation considers it is likely to be reliant upon when strategy is formulated. The UK government rhetoric regarding competition, is that increased competitiveness in the tendering process, is likely to lead to a more effective and economically viable services. Yet, Yeager, Zhang and Diana (2015) suggest that, in fact, an increase in a number of stakeholders involved in the funding and delivery of a service can also increase uncertainty and consequently result in reluctance to try new strategies.

The utility of RDT is demonstrated by the breadth of contexts to which it has been applied (Hillman et al, 2009). RDT is a useful lens through which to examine the organisation and management of sport because several different resources may be valued by sports organisations. These include human, financial, and physical resources (O'Boyle & Hassan 2014). Most sports organisations do not have the capacity to generate all the resources that they need, and this leads to a level of dependence upon external resources (Kenyon, Mason & Rookwood, 2018). Third sector sport organisations, such as community sport facilities rely heavily on government funding, an environmental dependency and one of the most difficult to control (Aharoni, Maimon, and Segev, 1981; Kenyon, Mason, & Rookwood, 2018). The application of RDT to sport management contexts is not novel (Wicker & Breuer, 2011), sport-for-all development (MacIntosh et al, 2016), sport governing bodies (Berry & Manoli, 2018) and the impact of austerity upon third sector sport organisations in the UK (Walker & Hayton, 2017). This research places RDT within network theory to understand the management strategies of community sport facilities within an era of austerity.

Resources, essentially those important to RDT, do not exist outside of social structures (personal and organisational) and are often embedded within interdependent networks, and a number of organisations may be involved in the overall provision of sport, or



the resources to provide sport (Walker & Hayton, 2017; Yeager, Zhang & Diana, 2015). Borgatti and Foster (2003) offer a comprehensive review of how resource dependency exists within networks that influence power, access to resources and facilitate and constrain behaviour. The application of RDT to the community sport facilities examined here, is particularly appropriate as this article considers power relations within networks, and examines the extent to which each organisation needs resources flowing through organisational structures. People or organisations exist within networks, irrespective of austerity, however, through austerity, network structures have been realigned, which has distorted power and resources and has constrained organisational behaviour (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; HM Treasury 2010, 2015).

Sport organisations and practitioners, like those under study in this article, are unable to act autonomously as independent atomistic agents because they are embedded in social relations with outside agencies, who control critical resources, and therefore power (MacIntosh et al 2016; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Furthermore, all partners within a network are vulnerable and constrained by the actions of others, as seen in sport contexts (Walker & Hayton, 2017), especially if those others have prominent positions of power in the network and control of valuable resources (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). Problems can arise not only because an organisation is dependent on its environment, but because the context of the environment is not dependable (Walker & Hayton, 2017). In network terms, because of the constraints that structure imposes on sport organisations (i.e., structural and relational embeddedness, see Granovetter, 2017), rational decision making of organisations is impaired, by positional, power and resource constraints of being in a complex network structure. To that end, it can be said within and across sport organisations that networks have structures and structures have consequences, which will have implications for resource-dependency.

This paper works on the premise, as highlighted above, following the lead of Borgatti and Foster (2003), that RDT is a surface level concept of an underlying network theory, in much the same way as social capital and embeddedness, therefore the two theories are deeply related, sharing the same ontological assumptions (i.e., that society including business is best thought of as a relational life and that there is interdependence among actors). To understand network theory in more detail, it is worth exploring the work of Mark Granovetter (1985), a founding scholar of the ‘new economic sociology’ approach to the economy, and a leading figure in the development of network/structural thinking in the social sciences, who claims, with a substantial amount of evidence, that all behaviour, including economic action, is embedded in social relationships (Granovetter, 1973, 1985, 1995, 2017). Others also support this claim, including Burt (1992, 2004, 2005), Uzzi (1996), and White (1992) who have all shown that behaviour (individual and organisational) does not happen in a social vacuum and devoid of context, unaffected by social motives of compliance, power, sociability, or status. That is, social influences on economic choices and behaviour cannot be regarded simply as disruptions or imperfections in otherwise natural economic arrangements. As such, it is possible to view economic action, and flow of resources as being socially situated and embedded in ongoing networks of personal relationships (Granovetter, 2017). Given the evidence that resource dependency is influenced by networks (Borgatti & Foster, 2003), it is important to situate RDT within network terms for examination, rather than using RDT as a standalone theoretical concept. As such, this research applies a dual lens to understand the context of funding for community sport facilities.

This article examines the consequences of austerity in terms of increased competition for resources, and in the context of an uncertain future for the delivery of sport services in England. Levels of dynamism and competition are high, while munificence has been reduced by significant cuts in funding. Work on the interaction between the economic and political

entities (in this case the State) with sport organisation and management strategies, that utilises an RDT approach within network terms is relatively rare and where this article make a contribution to the field of knowledge.

### **Community sport facilities, England**

This article considers the impact of political change on the financial sustainability of community sport facilities, through the lens of RDT within network theory. The management strategies and operations of non-profit community sport facilities are considered through three key factors; munificence, dynamism and competition. The levels of all of these factors have been impacted by austerity politics. Community sport facilities have become a key product of sport funding and geographic distribution and are common in several forms across all regions of England and the UK. Major funders for such facilities include local government, the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) (the government department responsible for the distribution of funding for sport), Sport England (the non-departmental public body for sport, under the DCMS), The Football Association, the Football Foundation (an independent national governing body) and The Premier League (a commercial enterprise). This has often been supplemented by National Lottery and corporate funding. This research is concerned with community sports facilities in England, which vary in size, structure and governance, but primarily focus on making sport and physical activity opportunities accessible to disadvantaged communities through sustainability operations.

Broadly, there are three types of community sport facilities involved in this research: Type 1, which are large artificial grass pitches with indoor facilities; Type 2, medium-size artificial grass pitches and facilities that are open access; and Type 3, small, local, open access facilities, often described as Multi-Use Games Areas (MUGAs). These operations are often managed by third sector sport organisations, or by local government, which makes them

particularly suitable for this article. The management teams often include a chief executive and/or a person of responsibility, who generally leads a steering committee of internal staff, volunteers and external stakeholders. These stakeholders include partner organisations, funders and local community representatives. Levels of munificence for all of the facilities have fallen because of government funding cuts. They therefore have an increased need to display dynamism, because they find themselves in competition for resources which have become more scarce since 2010.

## **Methodology**

### Participants

This research utilises qualitative data captured from in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior stakeholders working across community sport facilities, including facilities managers and regional and national funding representatives (N=24). These two groups of participants provided the research with coverage across the geographic regions in England (i.e., South East, London, North West, East of England, West Midlands, South West, Yorkshire and Humber, East Midlands and the North East). The study aims to increased understanding of how political change and subsequent austerity policy measures have been experienced by those working in community sport facilities, and how this has formed resource dependence in organisations and their surrounding environment. A purposive sampling approach was utilised to select senior figures (N=24) selected from the senior management teams of community sport facilities based in the major geographical regions of England (n=12), regional grant managers responsible for distributing funding to community sport facilities (n=6), and national funders of community sport facilities from both third sector and corporate organisations (n=6). The sample was based on organisations and facilities that offered a range of sizes (type 1, 2 and 3). All grant managers had worked in some capacity with the participating community sport facility managers.

Participants were selected from a national database of facilities held by a national funder of community sport facilities. Consideration was given to ensure all of the community sport facility participants had worked or volunteered at their respective organisation in excess of one year and held strategic or senior positions of influence with decision-making and/or management responsibilities. Further, each of the national funders of community sport facilities from the third sector and corporate funders had more than six years' experience working with, and commissioning, community sport facilities. This provided them with experience covering most of the period of austerity. Following this, all of the 24 participants were chosen to offer a wide range of geographical regions and different size of sport facilities. The researchers had no prior relationships with any participants and all invitations to participate were accepted. Prior to the interview, participants provided informed consent to take part.

#### Measures

Semi-structured interviews have often been used in research into third sector sport organisations (Parnell et al., 2014; Parnell et al., 2015) and similar research contexts (Hastings et al., 2015; Lowndes & Pratchet, 2012; Walker & Hayton, 2017). A semi-structured approach offered flexibility for the researcher to ensure a conversational discussion in order to build rapport and address topics as they emerge (Cargan, 2007; Parnell et al., 2014; Walker & Hayton, 2017). The interviews included a number of key themes, which were informed by a review of the literature, the research context, theoretical framework of RDT within network terms (see Table 1). The approach adopted allowed the researcher to build familiarisation with the participant, and bring clarity with regards to roles and responsibility during the initial two phases of the semi-structured interview. The themes that followed explored management challenges, management strategies and methods to overcome challenges, management successes, and lessons for success for community sport facilities from a range of stakeholder perspectives.

**Table 1: Semi-structured interview schedule, topics and example questions**

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Phase 1: Introduction and familiarisation

*Topics: Introduction, ethics, timing expectations, participant background.*

*Questions: Can you tell me about you background before you joined this organisation? Can you tell me what types of organisations and industries you have worked with?*

Phase 2: Roles and responsibilities

*Topics: Organisational context, purpose, role, responsibilities, organisational structures (i.e., governance), external environment, partnerships and resources?.*

*Questions: Can you describe your current role and responsibilities? Can you describe the structure of the organisation (or those that you work with)? How are these organisations governed? How have things changed in the external environment, during your time at the organisation? What types of partnerships exists across the organisation? How has this changed during your time here? Example prompts include decision making process, funding structures, funding experiences, volunteer support, financial status of the organisation/s.*

Phase 3: Management challenges in an era of austerity

*Topics: Changes observed surrounding the community sport facility, changes linked to policy change, management challenges or issues identified within organisational context, or in the external environment, or related to partnerships or resources*

*Questions: Can you describe changes internally or externally that have impacted upon the management of your organisation? Can you provide a description as to why these changes have occurred? Have the changes been within your control or a result of external changes? Can you describe how partnerships have limited or helped in responding to these changes? How have these changes influenced upon your access to resources? Example prompts include financial and capital assets, pitch maintenance, running costs.*

Phase 4: Management strategies to overcome and successes in an era of austerity

*Topics: Specific management responses that protected against identified change, management strategies implemented to protect against changes, consequences of management strategies, because of changes.*

*Questions: Can you describe management practice that were in place to help manage the impact of these changes? Can you describe new management practices introduced to limit the impact of these changes? Have your partnerships evolved because of changes? How have management strategies, whether new or existing, limited or helped the financial status of the organisation*

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## Procedures

The research team consisted of five members, with all researchers contributing to the interviews between March and July 2015. The researchers invested time in pilot interviews with connections to the researchers' personal networks who work within community sport.

This supported reflecting and discussion within the research team to ensure each researcher was consistent with respect to the semi-structured interview process. The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes, were recorded with dictaphones and transcribed verbatim. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms. After interviews with the three sets of stakeholders participating in the research were completed, recurring comments were identified using thematic analysis, and the research team judged that data saturation had been achieved.

#### Data analysis

To address inductive and deductive content, the analysis was undertaken in two stages. The first stage concerned the identification of the commentary directly related to the key management challenges, management strategies to overcome key issues, and successes under an era of austerity. This was undertaken by two of the research team (DP, EC). These were pooled to provide a single account for each area of interest. The second stage involved thematic analysis of data identified in phase one (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process of thematic analysis was split into six phases: (i) familiarisation with the data; (ii) generating initial codes; (iii) searching for themes; (iv) reviewing themes; (v) defining and naming themes and finally once there was a set of fully worked out themes; and (vi) writing-up (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In practice, however, analysis moved forwards and backwards between phases as required. As a result of this process, the themes reported in this research were consistent both in a single stage of the analysis and across the stages of analysis, providing a degree of triangulation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final process of the analysis involved the entire research team meeting to consolidate the data through a number of discussions. This included due consideration informed by the context and theoretical framework of RDT. The data are represented through the presentation of contextual verbatim extracts from the interviews. The purpose of this is to offer a rich insight into selected community sport facilities and their associated stakeholders.

## Results

The results from the research offer insight on how community sport facilities have experienced, managed and overcome challenges associated with the economic downturn and the subsequent government-led austerity policies. Table 2 offers the reader an indication of the headline themes and sub-themes developed from the qualitative thematic data analysis approach. The quotes that provide the contextually rich data collected can be found in the supplemental file.

Table 2: Results themes and sub-themes

<b>Overarching themes</b>	<b>Thematic sub themes</b>
<i>Management challenges in an era of austerity</i>	Reduced local authority services affected site management, with some at risk  Increased site-operating costs
<i>Management strategies to overcome challenges in an era of austerity</i>	Pricing strategies  Building networks for sustainability  Income diversification

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### **Management challenges in an era of austerity**

*Reduced local authority services affected facility management, with some at risk*

A recurring theme identified from the interviews was the reduction in local government sport and leisure services. Whilst clearly an external factor to the community sport organisations, many highlighted this as an explicit threat to their own working practice and in some cases existence. Janet, a community sport facility manager of a skate park and football facility in the East of England said:



*...since the change in Government the resources for local government have been both cut and restricted.*

Interestingly, the community sport facility was not resource dependent on the City Council financially, yet their relationship, power and network partnership has been threatened, as a result of the fiscal downturn and lower levels of public funding (Nienhüser, 2008; Widdop et al., 2018). Janet highlighted the perilous viability of the facility and the potential lucrative option available to the City Council to sell the site for property developments. This facility enacted a strategy to mitigate the risks associated with homogeneity of funding sources by maintaining a breadth of funders (Bielefeld, 1992). Whilst the purpose of the partnership with the City Council would allow this interconnected approach to achieve more together, the support of the City Council is now threatened (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). The precarious nature of City Council funding cuts has resulted in challenges to their resources, which were associated with super-austerity (Lowdnes & Gardner, 2016), and in turn decision making and power dynamics. This seemingly initial shared purpose and the importance of being ‘connected’ to the City Council (to access their resources and to enact power and influence), appears to have disappeared. This is a result of changes in the external environmental, notably factors related to funding cuts (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). This has challenged the power relationship within the network, and in this regard, the City Council is the more powerful making the community sport facility weak challenging their existence (Bonacich, 1987).

Other community sport facilities managers noted that whilst they did not require funding directly from the local authority, the precarious nature of their partnerships had created unintended negative consequences. This included a reduction in funding for, and subsequent contribution and engagement of partners within steering groups. For example, this could include funding cuts to parks and maintenance teams responsible to cleaning or repairing the facilities (see Dennis, community sport facility manager in the supplemental file). The

dependency of the community sport facilities on the human, and in some regard financial, resources of local government funding is evident. Bielefeld (1992) warned of over reliance on one funding source in case of unexpected economic shock. In this respect, the political impact of austerity driven policy measures, brought to fruition by local government based on central government cuts, demonstrates local government's control of critical resources that impact, and may detrimentally affect, the delivery of the community sport facilities (Hillman et al., 2009; MacIntosh et al., 2016). One of the national funding managers from a corporate enterprise recognised the national cuts and highlighted the need for local governments to prioritise sport, "Yes, of course the national funding cuts have an impact. We need to work with local government to make sure they prioritise sport. At the minute the success we have is mixed". The apparent loss of clear communication channels appears a direct result of austerity cuts and is a concern highlighted by community managers and regional grant managers. Claire, a regional grant manager for the North West of England highlighted redundancy and or re-deployment in local authorities and how this might impact service and future partnerships.

Whilst national government seek to step back from sport public services (Widdop et al., 2018), it is apparent that the reduction has broken down key communication channels and influenced resource dependency across networks (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). In turn this jeopardises the delivery of sport-based services, as found by Walker and Hayton (2017). It seems clear that reduced levels of government funding have had a negative impact on the ability of stakeholders to achieve their objectives in community sport to plan and deliver reliable services, an issue echoed in similar research (Carey & Braunack-Mayer, 2009; Kenyon, Mason, & Rookwood, 2018) The structural change that austerity has brought about has changed the power dynamics. This has impacted sports organisations two-fold. Firstly, the access to resources has altered and secondly as being a weaker position in the network, they have weaker

negotiation positions. As a result of these changes, the consequences have threatened how viable these facilities are (Granovetter, 1985; 2017).

### *Increased site-operating costs*

The effects of the economic down-turn, and resultant austerity measures, have had direct implications for community sport facilities. However, indirect impacts have also been felt in terms of the costs associated with operating facilities, as noted by Dennis, a southern regional grant manager who highlight a rise in the fees associated with running facilities and a reduction in the amount of support from other services. Both of which has made the management of facilities more difficult (see supplemental file)

This is not an isolated case as other regional grant managers highlighted observed such changes. Haydn works across a Northern region of England, *“the facilities have seen a variety of changes. Some local governments have just hiked up certain costs, whilst some have done this progressively over years. Either way, both approaches create different types of problems and challenge our facility managers”*. Yet, the rise in costs cannot all be the responsibility of local government. Linda is the national funding manager for a large third sector organisation, *“Water rates, room hire, electricity – they are all increasing and no-one appears ready or able to challenge it. Our facilities need to adapt and overcome if they are to survive”*. It seems clear from these statements that whether community sport facilities receive funding from local government or not, the politics of austerity and reduced local government budgets and coincided with more constrained networks (i.e., reduced support, sacked staff, re-deployment or reduced power and influence) (Carey & Braunack-Mayer, 2009; Granovetter, 1985; 2017; Kenyon, Mason, & Rookwood, 2018), which have meant that sport facilities have suffered (Hillman et al., 2009). While levels of munificence fall in many cases, rising costs of basic utilities affect the ability of stakeholders to provide a service.

## **Management strategies to overcome challenges in an era of austerity**

### *Pricing strategies*

All community sport facilities managers sought to develop meaningful methods to overcome the challenges facing their local communities regarding reduced local funding. Julian, a facility manager based in the North East of England explained the development of a pricing strategy to accommodate different service users (see supplemental file). The difficulty many managers face in operating facilities involves maintaining a broadly accessible facility for all members of the community. A dynamic or flexible pricing strategy allows facilities to maintain their focus on accessible participation. Sharing resources across users (according to their ability to pay) allows facilities to navigate the pressures on reduced local government funding. This response to national economic changes contributes to our understanding of dynamism and RDT (Dess & Beard, 1984). Colin a regional grant manager in London reported the difficulty in measuring whether a flexible pricing structure, but it kept people using the facility and secured its viability.

The balance between sustainability and accessibility is an apparent issue, which challenges the purpose of the facilities, especially in the absence of rigorous (i.e., measured, articulated, observable) data to support claims. Concerns over accessibility of facilities, especially to hard to reach or engage people is worthwhile. Research on sport facilities has showed that a strategy to increase pricing has not negatively impacted customer satisfaction, but it has coincided by a reduced focus on social inclusion objectives (Ramchandani, Shibli, & Kung, 2018). The dynamic or flexible pricing strategy appeared to lighten the burden placed on the amount of resource dependency on local government partnerships, whether through direct funding or shared resources (human and capital). This echoes findings by Eakin (2016)

who highlighted how the economic recession has a negative consequence on some people's spend. The potential of this, is that those who experience inequality are more greatly affected by austerity (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015). Yet, many facilities sought to reduce the threat to their sustainability by developing novel partnerships, demonstrating dynamism and attempting to move beyond a dependency on local authorities.

### *Building networks for sustainability*

A core component in RDT is network and social relations and how they impact on the flow of resources. Many facilities reported their ability to engage participants from across all aspects of the community, alongside providing a quality service and facility. This enabled them to demonstrate their value to worthy partners, increasing their likely sustainability in a competitive environment. One national funding manager, Davidas summarised their involvement in a partnership that was one of number they had developed to protect the sustainability of the facilities (see supplemental file). Notably, this was seen as a success with Davidas highlighting this model of developing networks, either third-third sector partnership or public-third sector partnership was being encouraged. This shift showed that some community sport facilities have transported their resource dependency from local government towards more established community sports trusts (often charities) attached to professional football clubs (Parnell et al., 2014; 2015). This represents a shift in the power relations between organisations operating community sport facilities (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). This also strengthened the community sport facilities' position, arguably creating a situation of mutual dependency within the network (Malatesta & Smith, 2014). In this case, dynamic change has worked in the favour of the sports trusts and those who manage the facilities. The development of local networks has allowed for community sport facilities to deliver participation targets, as they can access a broader network of local people through a range of organisations. Alan, a

community sport facility manager who worked in partnership with a professional football club in a City in the South of England explained how this allowed for a collaborative and strategic approach to maintain the facilities viability. :

This approach helps to maintain current levels of munificence, and also to develop new revenue streams, providing greater financial sustainability. This echoes findings in research examining sport-based third sector organisations facing financial difficulties (Walker & Hayton, 2017; Walker & Hayton, 2018). The creation of partnerships was part of the strategy employed by community sport facilities, the aim being to allow them to access resources through a range of methods and provide a resource themselves. In the absence of government leadership it is no surprise that football stakeholders have opted to invest in community sport facilities attached to professional football clubs (and regions) (Sport England, 2017), as part of football governing bodies and the individual clubs' commitments to corporate social responsibility initiatives. In turn, professional football clubs may become growing powers in providing community sport facilities (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Stakeholders have been dynamic in seeking partnerships and aiming to replace dependency on government funding. As such, sport organisations faced with these unsavoury structural conditions (i.e., the relationship between a local government and a sports facility), have looked to span structural gaps in the network and connect to previously unconnected parts, which acts as a source of new knowledge and resources, the nature of these ties are weaker in context and a source of innovation (Burt 1992; 2004; Granovetter, 1973).

### *Income diversification*

Established and managerially organised community sport facilities that might include a board, senior management team and large membership base have become engaged in novel examples

of income diversification and in some cases multi-sectoral social enterprise endeavours. In a Northern England town, Karen is the manager of a community sport facility who outlines the importance of membership fees and the diverse investments in a property purchase scheme (see supplemental file). This was an example of the community sport facilities moving towards more a more sustainable financial situation, and away from local government funding which is constrained by state policy. This ensured the autonomy of the organisation to focus on its goals of accessibility to sport and social activities, without total reliance on external influences. In the Midlands of England, Harry is a community sport facilities manager who explains their approach to fundraising (see supplemental file).

Both Karen and Harry had a finance background and emphasised their social accountability to their communities. Both the quality and effort of their management may have contributed to these successes. Marcus, a regional manager from the South of England who supports over 30 facilities in a variety of sizes highlights the importance of people, support and networks to continue to be financial viable through traditional fundraising techniques (Granovetter, 1973; 2017). Jordan, a community facility manager in the South West also represents this trend by managers who outlined their investment in a fundraiser to help build financial viability in the future. All facilities were able to navigate towards a situation whereby they were less vulnerable to external factors (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) by developing strategies designed to avoid reliance on one source of revenue generation (Nienhüser, 2008). They have shown dynamism and been able to reduce their vulnerability to changes in policy that they cannot control. This has included the reliance on or development of new networks (Granovetter, 1979; 2017)

## **Conclusion**

Non-profit community sport facilities in England have experienced challenges associated with the economic downturn and the subsequent government-led austerity policies, and attempted to overcome these challenges through a number of different management strategies. This research examined these strategies, covering all nine geographic regions in England. In the absence of existing empirical investigations, there were clearly identified gaps in our understanding as highlighted by recent research (Parnell, Millward, & Spracklen, 2014; 2017; Walker & Hayton, 2017). This article provides empirically informed insight, and the research carried out will contribute to the knowledge required by stakeholders and policy makers regarding the management strategies adopted by community sports facilities whilst navigating enforced political and economic change.

From the research, it is clear that austerity measures, and associated reduced levels of munificence, have obliged organisations to try to develop strategies that allow them to reduce their dependency on government funding. None of the facilities we worked with had closed, yet there was clearly an increased threat on the financial sustainability of the facilities. Austerity measures have a clear knock-on effect, even on organisations who do not receive government funding, due to the impact of reduced amounts of funding on other local community resources, and indeed on private individuals who may have some dependency on state benefits. There is an apparent dual squeeze on funding for organisations and individuals through central government austerity policies (Eakin, 2016; Widdop et al., 2018). This is particularly the case in low income areas where the cost of living is not matched by rising wages (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015). Those organisations that maintain some dependency on local authorities have reported that the cost of utilising resources has risen, and in some cases, the availability of those resources has decreased. Levels of munificence are not at a reliable level in the UK's community sport sector (Yeager, Zhang & Diana 2015).



Organisations that have been able to develop some association with the community programme of a professional football club or similar larger umbrella organisation have experienced positive benefits, for example, because the football club has been able to fund repairs to facilities. However, it is important to note that agents and agencies who control critical resources hold the balance of power (MacIntosh et al 2016; Nienhuser 2008; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Walker & Hayton, 2017). In this case, larger organisations provide significant funding and the reduction of this would clearly affect smaller organisations in a detrimental way. The balance of power remains with the key funder, although mutual dependency has been reached in some cases. Again, levels of munificence determine, to some extent at least, the health of any organisation. This is the case whether government funding is forthcoming or not. A stable and reliable level of funding is likely to increase the health of any organisation. Organisations with links across other facilities, and with other community stakeholders have experienced positive outcomes because they are able to share resources. Once again, however, the external environment cannot be considered dependable if any of the stakeholders might be vulnerable to problems in terms of finance. Pooling resources is one way of making the environment more dependable, as it widens the base from which physical input can be drawn. Despite this, Walker and Hayton (2017) appear to be correct in arguing that within a network, all partners are potentially vulnerable if one partner is at risk.

This research shows that community sport facilities are experiencing financial constraint, as a result of austerity policies. The efficacy of austerity policies has been criticised by the International Monetary Fund in its World Economic Outlook Report (2016). However, state policy in the UK seems likely to remain committed to austerity measures. A majority Conservative government has been formed following the 2017 General Election. Ideologically, the Conservative party remains committed to shrinking the state (McEnhill & Taylor-Gooby, 2017). Financial uncertainty developing around the prospect of the UK's withdrawal from the

European Union (EU) ('Brexit') must also be considered in future work in this area due to potential increased instability in business and charity sectors. The impacts of this withdrawal are as yet unclear but organisations previously reliant on funding from the EU will almost certainly need to seek alternative funding in the future. Bearing this uncertain political and economic climate in mind, further longitudinal research into the impact of public policy and sport policy on community sport facilities and their local communities is vital. It may be prudent to explore whether other leisure and cultural activities such as libraries, theatres and museums have experienced austerity. Measuring the health of the community sport sector appears important in ascertaining the long-term impact of austerity measures.

From a managerial perspective, both analysis through RDT and network theory indicates that community sport facilities managers must consider the power relationships of the partnerships they broker. Austerity policies and the subsequent fiscal constraint may impact upon these networks and power relationships, which sport managers must attempt to protect against. This may include formal relationships with larger organisations (for example, the charities attached to professional football clubs) to allow for shared resource dependence. Sport facility managers must consider flexible pricing strategies and both traditional and innovative means to generate financial viability. The amount of research on the impact of austerity and the impact of the economic downturn is relative sparse. This research not only adds further empirical insights to this area, but offers a new approach for theoretical analysis. In this respect, using RDT within a network theory approach, has allowed us to cover issues on how network flow and structure impact sustainability and operations within and in-between organisations.

It is important to highlight some of the limitations of the research. Whilst the research offered a range of stakeholders perspectives and insight across a variety of community sport facilities contexts across England it could be argued that the sample size is relative small and would have benefited from a greater cross section of facilities with respect to size and

geography. Furthermore, adding greater local level insight on population, indices of multiple deprivation, inequality, sport participation and local authority funding cuts could have helped tell the reader more. That being said, the existing research in the area examined is relatively scarce. While Walker and Hayton (2017) focus on one organisation, albeit to a high level of insight and Ramchandani, Shibli and Kung (2018) offer insights from their survey returns, this research offers insights from 24 stakeholder perspectives, offering a wider qualitative scope of comparison. The qualitative research carried out serves to offer the reader an insight into diversifying activities we have observed; however we do not claim to suggest they are *all* generalizable to all community sport facilities, but seek to offer the reader an insight to contextual into their own experience and setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Future research in the area is essential, because work on the interaction between politics and (sport) business that examines resource dependency, especially within network theory is not as commonplace as might be expected, but a viable approach for understanding this research context.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Supplemental file.

Results themes and sub-themes

<b>Overarching themes</b>	<b>Thematic themes</b>	<b>sub</b>	<b>Illustrative quotes</b>
<i>Management challenges in an era of austerity</i>	Reduced authority services site management, with some at risk	local affected	<p><i>We have a beautiful skate park and football facility in close proximity to the town and accessible for local young people and families alike. When we began this initiative, we had the backing and support of the City Council. This support focused on strategic support with the planning and development of the facility. We did not need funding from the council, but we did need their support. However, since the change in Government the resources for local government have been both cut and restricted. This is a major threat for us as the City Council are now considering the viability of our facility, as they have been offered a lucrative sum to demolish the site and build housing.</i></p> <p>Janet, community sport facility manager.</p> <p><i>We are frustrated with the City Council. When we kicked off this partnership what was key to our funding [in 2006] was the partnership between our organisation and the City Council. We had a strong steering group of representatives which helped strategically move us forward. Whether this was a small repair to a 3G pitch, or help to sweep up broken glass from a MUGA [multi-use games area], we had support. Now [in 2015] the parks and maintenance team has almost all but disappeared as a result of cuts and outsourcing and there is no clear person to contact [in the City Council] to help us.</i></p> <p>Dennis, community sport facility manager.</p>

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*Local authorities, especially sport development departments have undergone redundancy or re-deployment. Some of this has been poorly communicated at the grassroots level, many of our site managers have simply not been informed. For us this is can be problematic, as it risks past arrangements we had in place and raises scepticism over how we develop future partnerships.*

Claire, regional grant manager.

Increased site-  
operating costs

*As an organisation, we operate across a number of local authority facilities [these included small, medium and large facilities as part of the research focus], alongside operating our own community sports facility. We have always maintained a good working relationship, arguably, we still do. But, across all of our operations the cost to rent and run activities has steadily increased. This includes the open access smaller facilities, as the local authority would usually have the park wardens check and sweep the areas, but this has now been outsourced to a private company and we have had to contribute. When we have challenged the local authority about this and other rises in costs, they have cited increased operating costs, less finances in their local purse strings and a need for greater restrictions on their financial decisions. We understand there has to be tough decisions by the local government, but it just means that we have had to make too ones too.*

Dennis, regional grant manager.

*The facilities have seen a variety of changes. Some local governments have just hiked up certain costs, whilst some have done this progressively over years. Either way, both approaches create different types of problems and challenge our facility manager.*

Haydn, regional grant manager.

*Water rates, room hire, electricity – they are all increasing and no-one appears ready or able to challenge it. Our facilities need to adapt and overcome if they are to survive.*

Linda, national funding manager.

*Management strategies to overcome challenges in an era of austerity*

Pricing strategies

*Quite a few people who used our facilities to participate in sessions [physical activity and/or sport activity] highlighted their general struggle to manage personal finances. This was due to their personal rising cost of living. For them, many said that had to make decisions on whether to engage in sport or not, based on cost. For us [community sport facility], this was unacceptable. Of course, we had to manage our finances, but we had to keep the facility open and accessible. So, we developed a comprehensive pricing strategy for individual, family and group using the facility. Admittedly, we cannot say we reached everyone, you know, as we do not monitor it all we cannot say everyone kept coming. But we did keep many people coming and they reported their appreciation for our flexibility. It also helped us maintain a decent income to keep sessions going.*

*Julian, a community sport facility manager.*

*It's hard to say whether implementing different paying structures worked. Sure, we kept people coming and it helped within keeping the facilities open. But I cannot say we definitely kept engaging the so-called hard-to-reach people in our communities.*

*Colin, regional grant manager.*

Building networks for sustainability

*The facility is located in an area of high deprivation, well to be honest, poverty, for families and children. We would have struggled to maintain accessibility to the facility by the poorest in our community, without a strong partner in place. We helped partner the facility with a local Premier League Football Club. Their charitable arm become the partner, helping with coaches, booking free slots in our programme, sharing joint funding applications and renting space from us for education programmes. Our relationship has become much more. They have built a number of programmes that utilise our facility, so they also need us. From a business side, they help with the governance and marketing of the facility, but practically, if we have an accident or tear in the pitch, then they step in and fund a repair. This is huge for us. Without this type of relationship, the facility would be in disrepair and gone [no longer an operating community sport facility].*

*Davidas, national funding manager.*

*We work together. They [the community sport trust of the professional football club] are much*

better at engaging communities, and they work with them in our facility. We have applied for funding together from other charities and local government. We are planning some of this and doing it strategically, but sometimes they get access to funding whether through a club sponsor or somewhere else and it works to run that programme in our facility. We all win!

Alan, community sport facility manager.

Income  
diversification

*We have a huge membership and a strong history. That said, our income and current financial status rest primarily on the fact we received investment for an artificial grass football pitch. This enhance our facilities and help us attract kids and adults join to play. The boys came first to play, then their parents looked for activities for their siblings and then for themselves [parents wanted activities themselves]. This allowed us to grow our membership, and then our revenue base, alongside kick-starting a range of other activities for siblings and families... This funding has helped create resources to engage in two other initiatives that now generate a significant surplus each year. The first is a licenced social club facility attached to the sports facility. The new members access and support the sustainability of the social club. The second is property purchase programme. For the property purchase, we buy dilapidated houses, enlist members to volunteer the makeover of the property [alongside professionals], which we then rent to existing members for housing as a very affordable rate. At present, we no-longer rely on local government or grants, but we still go for them!*

Karen, community sport facility manager.

*We have a developing site that we have our work cut out with. However, financially we are stable. We have a very good membership that comes from the local community. Many dual focused fundraising activities generate funds for a local cause and the facility at the same time. This is particular important for raising funds and keeping a close connection with the community...*

Harry, community sport facility manager.

*As facilities have tried to protect themselves, we have recognised a shift in practice by community sport facilities. This is mainly in the larger sites that have a building or 3G pitch [artificial grass pitch]. But, that said, other open access sites who have a steering group, or you know, 'Friends of...*

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*for example.... Ashton Park', they have done it too. They have returned to what I would call traditional fundraising. By this I mean, buckets outside events, supermarkets, lotteries, events like dances or dinners.*

Marcus, regional grant manager.

*We have responded to less funds being accessible, whether is less success with grant application or the rising costs that come with running our facility, by engaging in lots of local fundraising. We have employed a fundraiser that represents us to the local community and business. It is slowly working and our facility is a modest site [Type 2, medium sized facility] and we plan on having a years' worth of surplus within the two years.*

Jordan, community sport facility manager.

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